

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

081436Z Jul 04

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 005674

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/07/2009

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: JORDANIAN CABINET SENDS MEDIA REFORM MEASURES TO PARLIAMENT

Classified By: DCM DAVID M. HALE FOR REASONS 1.5(B)(D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: THE JORDANIAN CABINET APPROVED JULY 6 THREE MEASURES AIMED AT LIBERALIZING PRINT AND BROADCAST MEDIA IN JORDAN. DRAFT REFORMS INCLUDE THE ELIMINATION OF PRE-PUBLICATION REVIEW OF BOOKS; PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS FROM DETENTION OR THE CLOSURE OF PUBLICATIONS WITHOUT A COURT ORDER; PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS FROM REVEALING THEIR SOURCES; A REQUIREMENT THAT GOVERNMENT AGENCIES RESPOND TO MEDIA INQUIRIES WITHIN A MANDATED TIMEFRAME; AND THE REORGANIZATION OF THE GOVERNMENT OWNED RADIO AND TELEVISION COMPANY (JRTV) AND WIRE SERVICE (PETRA), INCLUDING THE FORMATION OF EDITORIALY-INDEPENDENT BOARDS OF DIRECTORS. THE MEASURES WILL BE SUBMITTED TO THE PARLIAMENT FOR REVIEW DURING THE NEXT REGULAR SESSION, IN THE FALL. COMBINED WITH EARLIER MEASURES TO ELIMINATE THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND TO ALLOW FOR PRIVATE RADIO AND TELEVISION BROADCASTING, THESE STEPS ARE BEING HERALDED BY GOJ OFFICIALS AS PROOF THE GOVERNMENT IS SERIOUS ABOUT MEDIA REFORM. JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA OBSERVERS CONTACTED BY PA AMMAN PRAISE THE MEASURES AS FAR AS THEY GO, BUT SUSPECT A COMMERCIAL MOTIVATION AIMED AT ATTRACTING FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN THE MEDIA SECTOR AS MUCH AS A GENUINE COMMITMENT TO BUILD A FREE AND UNFETTERED PRESS. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) THE PRIME MINISTRY ANNOUNCED JULY 6 CABINET APPROVAL OF THREE DRAFT LAWS RELATED TO MEDIA LIBERALIZATION. THEY ARE THE 2004 DRAFT AMENDMENT TO THE PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS LAW; THE 2004 DRAFT AMENDMENT TO THE JORDAN RADIO AND TELEVISION (JRTV) CORPORATION LAW; AND THE 2004 DRAFT JORDAN NEWS AGENCY LAW. THE MEASURES ARE PART OF A BROADER MEDIA REFORM PLAN ENVISIONED BY THE GOVERNMENT TO OPEN UP AND IMPROVE JORDAN'S MEDIA SECTOR, INCLUDING BY ENCOURAGING GREATER PRIVATE INVESTMENT. A NUMBER OF POTENTIALLY SIGNIFICANT REFORM MEASURES ARE INCLUDED IN THE PACKAGE, THOUGH EVEN GOVERNMENT SOURCES ADMIT THEY ARE ONLY A PIECE OF WHAT WILL BE NECESSARY FOR THE EMERGENCE OF A VIBRANT MEDIA SECTOR IN JORDAN. THE MEASURES WILL BE SUBMITTED FOR PARLIAMENTARY REVIEW DURING THE LOWER HOUSE'S NEXT REGULAR SESSION, SCHEDULED FOR THE FALL. THE HOUSE IS CURRENTLY CONVENED IN EXTRAORDINARY SESSION TO ADDRESS A LINGERING BACKLOG OF LEGISLATION.

NO PRE-PUBLICATION REVIEW: A BOON TO PUBLISHERS?

3. (C) AMONG THE MORE INTERESTING MEASURES INCLUDED IN THE GOVERNMENT'S REFORM PACKAGE IS THE ELIMINATION OF PRE-PUBLICATION GOVERNMENT REVIEW FOR BOOK DRAFTS. ARTICLE 35 OF THE CURRENT PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS LAW REQUIRES THAT TWO COPIES OF ANY BOOK'S MANUSCRIPT BE SUBMITTED TO THE (FORMER) MINISTRY OF INFORMATION'S PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS DEPARTMENT AND THE APPROVAL OF THAT DEPARTMENT BEFORE A BOOK CAN BE PUBLISHED OR DISTRIBUTED. THE AMENDMENT ALLOWS PUBLICATION WITHOUT PRIOR REVIEW, REQUIRING ONLY THAT THE AUTHOR OR PUBLISHER DEPOSIT A COPY WITH THE PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS DEPARTMENT, WHICH RESERVES THE RIGHT TO CONFISCATE OR WITHDRAW THE BOOK FROM DISTRIBUTION "IF THE DIRECTOR DISCOVERS THAT THE BOOK THAT IS PRINTED...CONTAINS MATERIAL THAT CONTRAVENES LEGISLATION IN FORCE." THE CURRENT SYSTEM, COMMON THROUGHOUT THE ARAB WORLD, ACTS AS A DETERRENT TO AUTHORS, PUBLISHERS AND DISTRIBUTORS AND CONTRIBUTES TO A NOTORIOUSLY MORIBUND BOOK INDUSTRY IN JORDAN AND THE REGION. ONE AUTHOR TOLD IO SHE HAD RECENTLY COMPLETED A BOOK (ANALYZING NEW ARAB MEDIA) IN ENGLISH WHICH WAS APPROVED FOR PUBLICATION BY GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES WITH RELATIVE EASE, BUT THAT SHE HAD DECIDED NOT TO REQUEST APPROVAL FOR AN ARABIC VERSION FOR FEAR OF IT BEING BANNED OR SIGNIFICANTLY CENSORED, AS HAD EARLIER BOOKS SHE WROTE ON PRESS FREEDOM IN JORDAN. THIS CONTACT WAS HOPEFUL ABOUT THE NEW PROVISION AS AN INITIAL STEP IN FOSTERING A BETTER CLIMATE FOR JORDANIAN WRITERS -- AND READERS -- BUT NOTED THAT THE LANGUAGE IN THE DRAFT DOES NOT REDRESS EARLIER GOVERNMENT DECISIONS BANNING CERTAIN BOOKS AND AUTHORS.

4. (U) OTHER PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS LAW INCLUDE A BAN ON GOVERNMENT DETENTION OF JOURNALISTS OR CLOSURE OF PUBLICATIONS WITHOUT A COURT ORDER; ANOTHER CHANGE PROTECTS JOURNALISTS FROM REVEALING SOURCES. CURRENTLY, JOURNALISTS AND THEIR PUBLICATIONS ARE SUBJECT TO PROVISIONS OF THE PENAL CODE THAT MAKE IT A CRIME TO WRITE OR SPEAK OUT

ABOUT CERTAIN SUBJECTS, INCLUDING INSULTING MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL FAMILY OR "HARMING THE REPUTATION" OF JORDAN OR ITS RELATIONS WITH "FRIENDLY STATES." THESE PROVISIONS WERE INVOKED RECENTLY BY SECURITY AGENCIES TO ARREST THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF "AL MAJD" WEEKLY NEWSPAPER -- AND SUSPEND PUBLICATION -- FOR AN ARTICLE HE WROTE CRITICAL OF SAUDI ARABIA'S LEADERSHIP AT A TIME WHEN THE GOJ WAS ENGAGED IN NEGOTIATIONS TO EXTEND AN OIL-GRANT AGREEMENT. SUBSEQUENTLY, THE EDITOR WAS RELEASED FROM PRISON ON THE CONDITION HE APOLOGIZE IN PRINT AND WRITE AN ARTICLE IN PRAISE OF THE SAUDIS. THE EDITOR DID SO IN THE MAY 17 ISSUE, WHICH HE ANNOUNCED IN THE BANNER WOULD BE THE PAPER'S LAST. FINALLY, THE DRAFT AMENDMENT INCLUDES A REQUIREMENT THAT GOVERNMENT AGENCIES RESPOND TO REPORTERS' INQUIRIES WITHIN A SPECIFIED TIMEFRAME -- 24 HOURS FOR INQUIRIES OF A "TIMELY" NATURE, TWO WEEKS FOR THOSE NOT.

EDITORIAL LEEWAY FOR JTV AND PETRA

15. (C) THE CABINET APPROVED AMENDMENTS TO THE LAWS GOVERNING THE STATE-OWNED TELEVISION (JTV) AND WIRE SERVICE (PETRA) THAT MANDATE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF INDEPENDENT EDITORIAL BOARDS FOR EACH INSTITUTION. BOTH MEASURES ARE INTENDED TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY AND CREDIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S TWO MAIN VEHICLES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC. JTV, IN PARTICULAR, IS SEEN AS A CRITICAL FAILURE, WITH JORDANIAN AUDIENCES ABANDONING THE NETWORK'S TIRED AND FORMULAIC PRESENTATION TO GET THEIR NEWS FROM HIGHER QUALITY SATELLITE CHANNELS WHOSE EDITORIAL BIAS IS FEARED BY JORDAN'S LEADERS AS POTENTIALLY BUILDING RADICALISM AMONG THE JORDANIAN PUBLIC. THE GOJ HAS ALREADY ACTED WITH REGARD TO JTV, APPOINTING MUSTAPHA HAMARNEH, A PROMINENT AND OUTSPOKEN REFORMER (CURRENTLY DIRECTOR OF THE JORDAN CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES), AS THE DIRECTOR OF THE NEW BOARD. HAMARNEH HAS TOLD EMBOFFS HE WOULD LIKE JTV TO SHINE MORE LIGHT ON SENSITIVE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS IN JORDAN IN AN EFFORT TO BUILD CREDIBILITY AND REGAIN AUDIENCE. WHETHER HE AND THE NEW BOARD CAN CHANGE A CULTURE AT JTV THAT -- AT LEAST IN ITS NEWS REPORTS -- PUTS THE KING'S DOINGS FIRST, THE PRIME MINISTER SECOND, OTHER MINISTERS THIRD AND ALL OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST LAST (TIME PERMITTING), REMAINS TO BE SEEN.

16. (C) A SIMILAR BOARD IS ENVISIONED FOR PETRA, THE GOVERNMENT-OWNED WIRE SERVICE, WHICH CURRENTLY ACTS AS THE GOVERNMENT'S PRINT MOUTHPIECE. IO IS AWARE OF EARLIER DISCUSSIONS WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT OF ELIMINATING OR PRIVATIZING PETRA RATHER THAN REFORMING IT, BUT THE PRESSURE WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT TO HANG ON TO A SERVICE THAT ESSENTIALLY ISSUES GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASES APPEARS TO HAVE WON OUT. PETRA STORIES ARE RARELY PICKED UP BY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICES, AND GIVEN THE PRESENCE IN JORDAN OF REUTERS, AFP AND AP (ALL OF WHICH WRITE IN ARABIC AND ENGLISH) AS WELL AS THREE DAILIES IN AN OVERCROWDED PRINT MARKET, MANY IN JORDAN'S MEDIA SECTOR -- INCLUDING A FORMER MINISTER OF INFORMATION IN A CONVERSATION WITH IO -- ADVOCATED ELIMINATING THE SERVICE, AN ACT THAT WOULD REQUIRE THE GOVERNMENT TO COMPETE FOR NEWS COVERAGE AND THEREBY WORK HARDER TO EXPLAIN ITS PROGRAMS AND POLICIES TO THE PUBLIC.

COMMENT

17. (C) THE REFORM PACKAGE ADOPTED BY THE GOVERNMENT IS BEING BILLED AS JUST ONE PIECE IN A BROADER PROCESS TO INVIGORATE JORDAN'S MEDIA SECTOR. COMBINED WITH THE EARLIER ELIMINATION OF THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION (WITH ITS CORE RESPONSIBILITIES PRESERVED IN THE NEWLY-FORMED "JORDAN INFORMATION CENTER") AND PASSAGE OF AN AUDIO/VISUAL LAW THAT ALLOWS FOR THE FIRST TIME LICENSING OF PRIVATE RADIO AND TELEVISION BROADCASTERS, THE GOVERNMENT BELIEVES IT HAS UNDERTAKEN SIGNIFICANT STEPS TOWARDS ITS GOAL. HOWEVER, A CENTRAL MOTIVATION OF THESE EFFORTS APPEARS TO BE A DESIRE TO ATTRACT FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN THE MEDIA SECTOR BY MAKING JORDAN A VIABLE HOST FOR SATELLITE TV BROADCASTING AND REGIONAL PUBLISHING BUSINESS. OVERALL, THE EFFORT IS CLEARLY AIMED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, BUT SO FAR THE GOVERNMENT SHOWS NO REAL INCLINATION TO STEP SIGNIFICANTLY BACK FROM FREQUENT INTERVENTION IN THE PRESS (REF THE RECENT INCIDENT INVOLVING AL MAJD WEEKLY MENTIONED ABOVE), OR TO LIFT KEY LEGAL RESTRICTIONS ON SPEECH THAT LIMIT THE MEDIA'S EFFECTIVENESS IN ADDRESSING CONCERNS AMONG THE PUBLIC (E.G., CORRUPTION).
GNEHM